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VBPA

A survey on the question of how well veterinarians are prepared to predict their client's human-animal bond

Thomas E. Catanzaro, DVM, MHA

Summary: In a survey of 63 military veterinary facilities, actual responses from 961 clients were compared with 86 servicing US Army Veterinary Corps practitioners' predictions of the clients' responses. The survey questions were designed to evaluate the degree of human-animal bonding of the military clients. The survey revealed that the effects of human-animal interaction on community, family, and animal health have extensive impact on the military member, the military installation, and the military health care delivery system. Results revealed sociologic and psychologic factors that influenced the quality of life of mobile military members and their families. The survey also revealed that although the newly graduated veterinarians understood the professional and scientific values of their clients, they often underestimated the social interdependence between client and pet. The military veterinarians in this survey were considered to be representative of the new graduate, and the results are relevant to any civilian practitioner concerned with client relations or hiring new graduates.

To properly analyze the opinions of the mobile military population on human-animal bond factors, a survey was developed to evaluate 5 factors: a cross section of American pet owners, the mobile military family group, the pet's role in the quality of life of service members, the pet's role in community health, and the newly commissioned veterinarian's perception of the human-animal bond in the family group.[1]

The primary goal of the study reported here was to identify the benefits of companion animals for pet owners. This comparison between client responses and veterinarian's predictions of those responses was laterally completed by the attending veterinarians in hopes of providing information that might increase the sensitivity of educators and veterinarians to the importance of the human-animal bond in client relations.

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Materials and methods

Base-line concepts were developed from a 62-family survey.[a] Survey questions were developed from the subjective responses to that family survey, then the questions were expanded on the basis of professional health care experience of the military veterinarians, social workers, and psychiatry officers at the US Army Health Services Command. The questionnaire was refined into a 32-question, computer-ready format. To initiate the survey, 1,500 copies of the military human-animal bond survey were distributed to 63 military installations; 961 client surveys were returned (64%). Also, it was requested that the supporting military veterinarian complete a survey and attempt to predict the average client response; estimates were received from 86 veterinarians (50.2%). The distribution of the client survey was conducted so that every person who walked through the door on a given morning was handed a survey and asked to complete it to the best of their ability.

The typical military veterinary facility (referred to as an Animal Disease Prevention and Control Facility) operates by appointment only, for approximately 12 to 16 composite hours during a week. The veterinarian usually is a new graduate, with the values, attitudes, and skills that have accumulated after 4 years of veterinary medical education. During the remainder of duty time (30 or more hours/week), the military veterinarian is scheduled to do community public health activities, such as sanitary inspections, zoonotic disease surveillance, hospital committee attendance, or supervision of enlisted personnel who do food inspection.

Most veterinary facilities on military installations are permitted only to conduct diagnostic procedures until the causative agent is identified. If a zoonotic or economically important disease is identified, or if an organism that causes the spread of a potentially zoonotic organism is suspected and the acute condition can be readily cured, the veterinarian may treat the animal; however, if a nonzoo-

[a]Cain AO. A study of pets in the family system. Presented at the First International Conference on the Human/Companion Animal Bond, 1981.

notic condition is diagnosed, or if treatment would require long-term care, it is requested that the facility refer the case. For these diagnostic and vaccination services, the average client pays $12 to $18/visit.

The art of veterinary medicine has been defined in many ways, but for the sake of this discussion, it will be defined as the veterinarian's ability to detect the client's bond with his or her pet, and how that bond may influence the decision process on patient care.

Survey technique—Respondents were asked to place an X on a line below the words always, usually, sometimes, or never that most usually represented their feelings. This format was used throughout the survey to better identify the trends. Accuracy was increased by dividing the line into at least 10 segments when quantifying the responses for computer tabulation. Exceptional ratings were required to be on the left or right 20% of the line; responses marked on the center 60% were considered neutral.

Results

The respondents in the owner survey population consisted of 34.2% husbands, 52.9% wives, and 12.9% other, and ranged in age from 19 to 71 years. The veterinarians responding were predominantly male (83%), and had graduated from veterinary school not more than 3 years before the survey. The sample sizes were considered adequate to compensate for particular practice irregularities or great variances in responses. The clients reported that 77.4% visit their veterinarians 2 or more times/year/pet (compared with 70.9%, as estimated by the veterinarians); 59.8% were exceptionally satisfied with the veterinary services (veterinarians thought only 23.2% would be exceptionally satisfied); 34.4% usually celebrated the pet's birthday (veterinarians predicted 17.4%); 53.1% displayed pictures of their pet at home (compared with 44.2%, as estimated by the veterinarians); and 50.4% stated that their pet was extremely important to their family (the veterinarians predicted only 26.7% would rate pets this high on the importance scale).

Questions that attempted to quantify the reasons why an animal is less important to some persons were included. Housing limitations were ranked by clients and veterinarians as the most frequent reason for not owning a pet. Inconvenience was ranked second by both. The clients' third reason was that too much time was required for care; veterinarians rated this reason 8 on a scale of 10. Undesirable behavior was ranked tenth by the clients; veterinarians estimated this would be ranked sixth.

The veterinarians predicted that 23.8% of the clients spent $100 or more/year/pet for other than food, but 37.8% of the clients reported that they spent $100 or more. The veterinarian and client responses agreed on what children gained from having a pet, in order of most to least important: learn responsibility, companionship, pleasure, respect for life, gentleness, and education in life processes.

Table 1—Changes in family interaction with the introduction of a pet

Family factor	Increase (%)		Decrease (%)	
	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
Arguing	8.0	12.8	9.2	9.3
Affection expressed around pet	59.3	54.7	0.7	0
Travel and freedom	6.8	1.2	39.3	55.8
Happiness and fun	70.1	65.1	1.4	0
Responsibility	63.5	68.6	0.7	0
Time together as family (with pet)	51.7	44.8	1.3	2.3

Table 2—Expected problems associated with pet ownership

Problem area	More than expected (%)		Less than expected (%)	
	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
Housebreaking	15.1	36.0	31.5	15.1
Disciplining	17.8	32.6	27.0	12.8
Feeding	6.4	9.3	23.7	15.1
Behavior with family	10.6	17.4	22.2	18.6
Location or territory	11.9	29.1	19.7	10.5
Grooming	18.1	30.2	17.1	12.8
Cleaning	14.5	27.9	18.7	10.5

Table 3—Reasons for clients selecting a civilian veterinarian

Reason	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
Range or scope of services	1	1
Professional skills of veterinarian	2	6
Availability of after-hours service	3	2
Convenience to residence	4	3
Appointment hours	5	4
Personality of veterinarian	6	5
Telephone assistance	7	9
Cost of services	8	11
Personality of staff	9	7
Veterinary specialists on staff	10	10
Facility appearance	11	8
House call services availability	12	14
Knowledge of unique problems	13	13
Parking	14	12

In evaluating the changes associated with bringing a pet into a household, the survey addressed family interaction changes. The factors and changes are given in Table 1. A closer comparison was expected when discussing potential animal problem areas; however, this was not the case (Table 2).

To evaluate why certain people used certain veterinarians, 14 reasons were provided, and respondents were asked to rank them in order of importance (Table 3), with 1 being the most important and 14 being the least important reason. Veterinarians predicted accurately the reasons for selection of a practice, but their estimates of the importance of a pet diverged largely from the responses of the clients. When clients were asked to evaluate how important their pet was to their family, 50.3% reported extremely important, 33.8% reported very important, and 12.4% reported important; veterinarians predicted approximately half this response rate. To better evaluate the importance of

Table 4—Evaluation of the importance of the pet in specific situations

Situation	Great importance (%)		No importance (%)	
	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
At all times	75.4	46.5	1.7	1.2
Temporary absence of spouse	73.2	58.1	6.7	2.3
Free time or relaxation	71.4	46.5	2.8	1.2
Childhood period	69.8	66.3	9.7	2.3
Sad, lonely, depressed	68.4	67.4	5.1	3.5
Marriage without children	58.6	47.7	25.5	15.1
Temporary absence of children	53.3	32.6	17.5	14.0
During illness or after other's death	52.1	44.2	14.0	7.0
During crisis or separation or divorce	50.4	45.3	16.4	8.1
During moves or relocations	48.2	23.3	17.6	15.1
Teenage period	44.5	27.9	16.1	9.3
Unemployment	35.7	23.3	31.4	24.4

The percentages on each line are of the total population, and show those that recorded their X on the right or left 20% of the answer line; the percentage unaccounted for was in the center 60%, considered neutral for this study.

the companion animal, the line scale was used for 12 specific situations (Table 4).

In addition to questions concerning the importance of the pet to the family, other questions were posed to evaluate the anthropomorphic tendencies of the respondents. When asked how the companion animal fit into the family, 68.3% of the clients stated that the pet had full family member status, whereas only 38.4% of the veterinarians predicted this degree of bonding. Later in the survey, the questions were rephrased, and the client was asked whether the pet was afforded people status in the family. The line scale was used and the respondent was asked to rate the status from always to usually and from sometimes to never. Results showed 38.8% of the clients believed their pet was always afforded people status (veterinarians predicted 16.3%), 71.7% believed their pets were usually to always afforded people status (veterinarians predicted 52.3%), and 3% of the clients reported that their pet was never afforded people status (the veterinarians predicted 8.1%).

Many traits or attributes are credited to the companion animal during daily conversations, so the survey asked specifically what special characteristics the pet displayed. The responses were placed on the line scale (Table 5).

In evaluating the responsiveness of the pet, clients reported the pet displayed usually quick positive responses 86% of the time for parents and 48% of the time for children, whereas the veterinarians estimated 89% for parents and 62% for children. To consider negative interactions, the question was rephrased and the respondents reported the pet displayed usually quick negative responses 23% of the time for parents and 25% of the time for children. The veterinarians estimated that usually quick negative responses toward parents and children would be 30 and 29%, respectively. Respondents reported that about half the pets never showed a quick negative response to adults, whereas the veterinarians estimated that only one third would never show a quick negative response. Clients reported that less than 1% of the pets never showed a quick positive response, and veterinarians agreed by estimating that all pets would show a quick positive response at some time.

A question was posed concerning the pet's response when family members showed affection toward each other. The clients reported that 78.7% of the pets wanted active involvement (veterinarians estimated 68.6%), whereas 6.8% of the pets never responded (veterinarians estimated 9.3% would never respond). When asked about the pet's response during times of high anxiety or crisis in the family, 59.2% of the owners reported that their pet usually wanted interaction with the family, whereas the veterinarians estimated only 37.2% would want interaction. In regard to the companion animal's response to a new addition in the family group, 38.3% of the family animals showed positive behavior changes, 16.3% showed negative behavior changes, and 45.4% showed no change. The veterinarians predicted that only 15.1% would show

Table 5—Reported special characteristics shown by companion animals

Characteristic	Great display of trait (%)		No display of trait (%)	
	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
Greets you upon coming home	89.4	82.6	1.5	1.2
Pet understands when you talk to him/her	77.0	58.1	0.9	1.2
Communicates to you	73.0	60.5	1.4	3.5
Demand for attention	59.6	51.2	2.3	3.5
Understands or is sensitive to your moods	59.3	48.8	4.2	5.6
Stays close when you are anxious or upset	49.7	27.9	10.7	18.6
Sleeps with family member	44.9	31.4	34.8	37.2
Mimics your emotions	22.6	20.9	23.4	30.2
Hides or withdraws when you are anxious or upset	11.8	16.3	56.3	38.4
Expresses feelings that you cannot or do not	10.6	10.5	58.6	41.9
Develops illness when family tension is high	3.9	7.0	84.3	70.0

The percentages on each line are of the total population, and show those that recorded their X on the right or left 20% of the answer line; the percentage unaccounted for was in the center 60%, considered neutral for this study.

positive change, 12.8% would show a negative change, and 72.1% would show no change in behavior.

The pet's role as a third party in arguments or in stress relief was surveyed by the question, "When tension between 2 persons exceeds a certain level, it has been noted that a third party is brought into the discussion to dissipate the intensity of the tension; does this occur with your pet becoming that third party?" The survey revealed that 8.2% of the respondents said the pet was always the third party involved, 43.8% reported that it occurred sometimes to always, and 38.4% reported that it never occurred. The veterinarians estimated it would always occur in 2.5% of the cases, it would occur sometimes to always in 46.9%, and it would never occur in 28.4%.

With the highly mobile life-style seen in today's workplace, the survey asked what would happen to the pet at times of family relocations or household moves. The scope of choices and responses are given in Table 6. To further evaluate the strength of the family/pet bond, respondents were asked what they would do if their pet became seriously ill; results are given in Table 7.

Table 6—Expected disposition of animal when family relocates

Action	Move within country (%)		Move overseas (%)	
	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction	Clients' response	Veterinarians' prediction
Take with you to new home	65.4	82.9	35.6	20.0
Ship to new home	13.3	11.8	46.8	49.2
Give away	5.2	3.9	8.9	20.0
Turn-in for adoption	1.5	1.3	2.8	9.2
Give to humane society	1.6	...	1.4	1.5
Sell	1.1	...	1.4	...
Turn in for veterinary disposal	1.1	...	1.0	...
Release to farm or woodland	1.0	...	0.7	...
Abandon	0.9	...	0.8	...

Table 7—Expected client action when pet becomes seriously ill

Situational response	Clients response (%)	Veterinarians' prediction (%)
Do whatever the military veterinarian recommended	41.2	29.9
Do whatever was needed if pet could be returned to normal health	19.8	13.4
Do whatever was needed for disabled pet as long as no pain or suffering	18.1	11.8
Do whatever the civilian veterinarian recommended	10.6	15.3
Have pet euthanatized if treatment costs more than $200 to $250	6.0	18.1
Have pet euthanatized before treatment costs any more	1.8	6.7
Let nature take its course	1.3	1.9
Replace ailing pet with healthy pet	0.3	3.5

Respondents were asked if they had ever had a pet that was lost, that had died, or that had been killed and to describe the degree of loss felt by the family. Almost all clients (94.4%) reported important to extreme loss, and 58.8% of those said it was an extreme loss; only 0.1% of the clients reported no loss was felt. Whereas the veterinarians' estimates for important to extreme loss approximated the clients (93.8%), they said only 27.2% would feel extreme loss; also, the veterinarians estimated that no client would report no loss was felt. Another question was asked dealing with the disposition of the deceased companion animal; the results are given in Table 8. Almost 70% of the clients wished to bury their animal.

Table 8—Preferred companion animal remains disposition methods

Disposition action	Clients response (%)	Veterinarians' prediction (%)
Bury in marked grave, but not in pet cemetery	42.6	34.6
Take to veterinarian or humane society for disposal	28.3	27.2
Bury, but not anywhere special	14.8	27.1
Bury with full ceremony in pet cemetery	12.8	6.2
Let someone else dispose of pet	1.6	1.2
Dispose of by standard waste removal services	0.7	3.7

Discussion

The proximity of the Animal Disease Prevention and Control Facility enhances the choice of military clients to use the military veterinarian. Although the client pays for all goods received, there is a perception of true value, because high profit should not be a motive of the military facility operations. The facility operates to protect the health of the soldier and the public health of the federal community surrounding the military working/training environment; the clients accept the restricted (by appointment only, refer if chronic) veterinary medical service support program as necessary for typical military readiness and mobilization.

Conversely, a newly graduated military veterinarian and a newly graduated civilian-salaried veterinarian are expected to have similar value profiles.[2] A new graduate brings only knowledge learned in school and a small amount of personal experience learned from another veterinarian. A new veterinarian enters an established practice with established rules, procedures, and techniques for handling clients; the new practitioner must comply with the practice standards already established. A recent graduate generally requires close supervision and development in areas of client relations.

The differences in veterinarian prediction and client response (Table 1) were attributed to the youth of the military veterinarians, especially in reference to their family experiences. It was thought that Table 2 would show better predictions, but the

number of owners with the response of less than expected was high.

The veterinarians generally predicted negative responses about pet and family interactions that were not reported by clients. The clients reported that less than 1% of the pets never showed a quick positive response, and the veterinarians predicted that clients would believe that all animals have some good in them. The figures in Table 7 reflect a responsible pet ownership being supported by veterinarians.

Emotional stress developed when a pet was lost, had died, or was killed. Table 8 was designed to compare client values with common practice methods. In theory, clients and veterinarians were equally sensitive to the need for burial.

Results of the survey implied that military pet owners have more intense human-animal bond feelings than other groups in similar surveys.[3,4] It appeared that the economic, educational, and social structure of the military respondents were the key factors affecting results of the survey. In this survey population, 54% were mothers, less than 34% had a college education, and most earned less than $20,000/year. In comparable studies, the respondents in the surveyed population were better educated, included more females, or had a higher economic status.

By identifying the center 60% of the response line as neutral, the intensity of the clients' emotions could be better identified; this also caused the responding veterinarians to appear less perceptive. The veterinarians estimated the clients effectively in matters of professional or scientific judgment, but appeared to underestimate the intensity of the social interdependence between animals and human beings. If the negative responses were evaluated for the same answer line, it would be noted that the veterinarians generally overestimated the response; that is, they could not imagine clients that could not see the value of a companion animal. Veterinarians' responses often were on the center 60% of the answer line, thereby masking their mediated responses.[5] When educational trends are observed,[6,7] it can be seen that universities are aware of the need to teach ethics and values, as is the American Veterinary Medical Association. But when these ethics are applied, the new graduate appears to mediate his response from his personal intense belief. From management experiences, this response could be credited to a new employee syndrome, common to the military or to civilian practice; that is, what will the boss tolerate?

The importance of the companion animal to the family appeared to be substantially greater in this survey population, compared with populations considered in other surveys. However, the responses concerning companion animals in family situations were similar in most populations. The low estimates by the veterinarians might be indicative of a lack of experience or of memories of a few bad experiences in the first few years of practice. Regardless of cause, the importance of the human-animal bond in client relations must be realized, and sensitivities should be increased in academic and practice environments.

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